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## Blessed are the Meek: The Land and Economic Justice

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# BLESSED ARE THE MEEK: THE LAND AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE

"Ahab said to Elijah, 'So you have found me, my enemy!' 'I have found you,' he answered, 'because you have sold yourself to do evil in the eyes of the Lord.'" I Kings 21:20

Mark Love

The judgement that Yahweh brings upon Ahab goes to the heart of the biblical message concerning God's desire for economic justice. This narrative begins with Ahab's desire to add to his palace holdings in Jezreel. He covets Naboth's vineyard and wishes to use it for a palace garden. Ahab approaches Naboth with an offer that seems more than equitable. He offers a better piece of land, or the option of taking cash for the value of the property. Naboth refuses. "The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers!" Ahab returns to Samaria despondent. The Queen, Jezebel, mocks Ahab. In essence she tells him, "let me show you what a sovereign looks like, you little wimp!" Jezebel proceeds to have Naboth falsely accused of sedition and stoned to death, thus allowing Ahab to have his garden plot.

The attitudes of the three characters in our narrative are insightful in determining the intent of God's desire concerning the land in Israel's existence. Ahab wishes the land to be a commodity to be owned and traded. As Walter Brueggemann points out, Naboth's view is quite different. "For Naboth land is not a *tradable commodity*, but an *inalienable inheritance*... It is the case not that the land belongs to him, but that he belongs to the land." Jezebel is baffled as to how a king could seem so powerless in attaining

what he desires. Her view of sovereignty is Caananite in which the ruling institution can make demands on the land by the nature of its ruling. She owns what Brueggemann calls "a mercantile view of land in which land is a commodity to be secured by whatever means, and an alien view of Torah which makes the king immune from its demands."

The judgement that Elijah brings to Ahab and Jezebel is severe as much for their view of the land as it is for the fact that they killed to obtain it. To view the land differently from Naboth is to deny the foundations of justice crucial for Israel's existence. Israel is to be a holy people, a nation set apart, a sign of righteousness for the nations. They are a gifted people called to live in covenant with God, with neighbor, and with the land. The land becomes the stage upon which Israel lives out faithfulness before God.

The biblical message pertaining to "the land" stretches from creation to the second coming of Christ. Brueggemann suggests that "the land" may be the most useful way of organizing a biblical theology. His point may be overstated, but there is little doubt that this theological strand has been neglected. In significant ways it is a prism for faith. This article will attempt to draw out this motif as it appears in different contexts in the biblical narrative. In the passages we will consider, we will see a God who has a preferential concern for the poor — a God who seeks economic justice.

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## Creation

Our story begins with the land as an elemental part of human existence. The first chapter of Genesis places humankind in the context of the cosmos in relation to God. Man and woman together bear the image of God and stand at the apex of a creation marked by order and purpose. Part of that purpose is seen in God's admonition for humankind to have dominion over the earth. Chapter two is concerned with describing why humans are the way that they are. In the midst of this account of creation, two word plays reveal important relationships to the persons God creates. The first is seen in 2:7 as God creates man ('adam) from the land ('adamah). The

second is seen in 2:21-23 as God creates woman ('ishah) from the man ('ish). As E. A. Speiser points out, these are more than cute puns used to creatively tell the story. They are indicators of a depth of relationship. There is an

implied covenant in their naming. Man and woman. Earth and earthling. They are bound together. They are part and counterpart. There is a fundamental relationship that is important to the way God has ordered and created a world.

The fundamental nature of the relationship between 'adam and 'adamah can be seen in the curse placed upon man in the Fall. As Gerhard Von Rad explains, the Fall "strikes the most elementary realm of male effectiveness — the earth... a solidarity of creation existed between man and the ground. But a break occurred in this affectionate relationship, an alienation that expresses itself in a silent, dogged struggle between man and the earth."<sup>4</sup>

Both of the implied covenants of Genesis 2 become focal points for idolatry in the life of Israel. Sexual impurity and economic exploitation are often seen as two sides of the same idolatrous coin. The prophets denounce those who abuse both women and the land. Both relationships are perverted by promiscuity and domination. As Brueggemann points out, both of these tendencies reduce women and the land to a mere commodity. In promiscuity a man uses and discards. In domination a man holds and controls. In both what needs to be held in covenant relationship is treated as a commodity. An example of this can be seen in Ezekiel 18:5-9. Who is the righteous man? "He does not defile his neighbor's wife... He does not oppress anyone but returns what he took in pledge for a loan. He does not commit robbery but gives food to the hungry and provides clothing for the naked..."<sup>5</sup>

**The two metaphors used consistently and interchangably to describe how Israel got the land are "gift" and "inheritance," both of which underscore Yahweh's ownership. To claim anything else for the land demonstrates a profound loss of memory.**

The covenantal language of Genesis 2 and the interpretation of what constitutes proper land use by the prophets would suggest that "dominion" does not allow for exploitation or excessive accumulation. As Claus Westermann points out, "It is clear...that the subjection of the animals, as also the subjection of the earth, which is but an extension of the former, in no wise implies exploitation." The nature of the covenant precludes such activity. While humankind has dominion and power over the earth, our creatureliness binds us to the land. The land bears, nurtures, sustains, and holds humankind. It is God's partner in sustaining life.

It is humankind's partner in serving God and brothers and sisters. The land is the Lord's to be used for the benefit of all of creation.<sup>6</sup>

Flipping through radio stations the other day, I came across a talk show in which the host was

bemoaning the hoopla surrounding Earth Day. His tirade against the "goo-goo" environmentalists turned to their claims that grazing animals use too much arable land that could be used better from a food production perspective. His concluding remark in this monologue was, "I will not give up my steak because someone is starving in Bangladesh. That just isn't my problem." I do not have the expertise to know whether cattle are using too much arable land, but I do know that creation theology demands that starvation in Bangladesh is my problem.

## Torah

The story of the land is picked up with the promise to Abraham in Genesis 12. This is a promise of renewal. It is a promise of God's salvation for the nations. It is a promise to reorder creation by God's priorities. In the middle of that promise is land—"go to the land that I will show you." It is a place to live before God.

The land is to be a gift received in faith. The promise cannot be manipulated or controlled. It is not dependent on the cunning or resourcefulness of the recipient. The heir will not come through a concubine. The manna cannot be stored. In fact, God's faithfulness is the emphasis of this story of the promise. The story of the heir travels through barrenness. The journey to the land is charted through a wilderness. Yet, the reality of the journey is "You lacked nothing!" (cf. Ex. 15:16-18).

And now, in view of this story of grace, God's



people are called to show his justice to the nations as recipients of promise. This promise is to be lived out in relationship to the land. In the development of the Torah in Israel's existence standards of justice and righteousness are defined. These standards gain much of their shape and meaning in relation to the land.

There is an organic relationship between Israel and the land. For Israel to sin is to defile the land. God's standards of justice and righteousness are to be

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honored so that "the land where I am bringing you to dwell may not vomit you out" (Lv. 20:22; also 18:25; 25:18,19). Harkening back to our two covenant relationships noted in creation, the law makes it clear that the land is despoiled when women are profaned in harlotry (Lv. 19:29). Care and concern for the land and its use are required, including a sabbath year of rest (Lv. 25:5). The land is a partner in this experiment in being a holy people.

But the fundamental understanding of the land in the Torah is that it belongs to Yahweh. The two metaphors used consistently and interchangeably to describe how Israel got the land are "gift" and "inheritance," both of which underscore Yahweh's ownership. To claim anything else for the land demonstrates a profound loss of memory. As Luke Johnson writes,

The land in which the Israelites dwelt was regarded as the gift of God who called them out of the bondage in Egypt. It was his to give because he was the creator of all things. It was a gift given to all the people. And as the people had no claim to existence except by the call of Yahweh, so did they have no claim to the land except as it came as a gift from God... Specifically, it was the way the Israelites used the property either to hurt or help their fellows that indicated in a concrete fashion whether they clung to Yahweh.<sup>7</sup>

This place is filled with "great and goodly cities, which you did not build, and houses full of good things, which you did not fill, and cisterns hewn out, which you did not hew, and vineyards and olive trees which you did not plant..." (Deut. 6:10-11). "Beware" is the warning

of God. "Beware lest you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth'" (8:17). Time and again the admonition in Deuteronomy is "Take heed lest you forget..." (6:12; 8:11-17; 11:16). This land is radical gift.

In fact, though given to Israel, the land is still the Lord's. "The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants" (Lev. 25:23). Israel, as a gifted people, is invited to partake with God in an experiment of glory. Their use of the land is to reflect their status as a people formed and sustained by the mercies of God. A people who know well oppression and the precarious life of a wanderer (sojourners in the wilderness) should always reflect God's mercy to the poor and the sojourner in their midst. Land is to be tended in such a way as to secure the continued survival of its inhabitants (Cf. Lev. 25:1-7 and the interesting passage in Dt. 20:19-20 that forbids the wanton destruction of trees). Stipulations in the law hold out the promise that those who find themselves cut-off or in dire circumstances will always have economic viability among God's covenant people.

Widows, the fatherless, and sojourners occupy a place of prominence in the Torah and throughout the Old Testament. This is especially seen in the injunctions concerning the practice of gleaning. "When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the alien, the fatherless and the widow" (Dt. 24:19ff; also 24:17; Lv. 23:22).<sup>8</sup> Several ordinances deal with the plight of those down on their luck — those generally designated "the poor." Most of these deal with employment conditions or loan repayment (cf. Dt. 24:15ff; Lv. 25:35-47). Deuteronomy 15 expresses the heart of the matter, "there will be no poor among you ... if you will obey the voice of the Lord your God... You shall give to (the poor) freely ... because for this will the Lord your God bless in all that you undertake. For the poor will never cease out of the land; therefore I command you, you shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy, and to the poor in the land" (Dt. 15:4-11).

In addition to the concern for the widow, fatherless, sojourner, and the poor, the Torah contains strict prohibitions concerning the accumulation of land. This begins at the top. Deuteronomy 17:14-20 sets guidelines for kingship that would restrict lavish and excessive living. The fundamental identity of the king is "One from among the brethren." The king is as bound to the covenant stipulations of land use as anyone else. This is precisely the point of the story of Ahab and Naboth. No one can accumulate land at the expense of others -- not even the king.

The land is divided to provide enough for all the heirs in Israel. Each inheritance is a trust from God to be handed from generation to generation. For this reason, the law stipulates that boundary markers are



never to be moved (Dt. 19:14). As noted above, the land can never be sold permanently. This reality is clearly seen in the intent of the Jubilee. The Jubilee stipulates that every fifty years the land is to be rearranged after its original distribution. There is much debate as to the particulars of Jubilee, but it seems clear that it is intended to prohibit excessive accumulation of land. This holds forth the promise that God's creation will be enjoyed by all.

Tom Olbricht summarizes all of this well. "God planned for his people to be blessed and in turn to bless others around them. Israel was once a slave and a stranger in a foreign land, but God gave the people a land and resources. Israel's proper response was thus to share with strangers and unfortunate people."<sup>9</sup>

### The Gift as Temptation

As Brueggemann has skillfully pointed out, even the gifts God bestows upon his children can be a source of temptation.<sup>10</sup> The temptation lies in our desire to own, control, accumulate, and manage God's provision. This is certainly true for Israel and the land. The prophets serve in Israel's history to warn and cajole and to jog memories to the realization that the land is God's gift. The gift of land is like the manna in the wilderness in that it refuses to be managed. It betrays a lack of faith in the provision of God to gather more than is needed. It is God who sustains in the land. It is not the result of the cunning and resourcefulness of those who lie awake at night planning what fields they might add to their holdings. "Woe to you who add house to house and join field to field till no space is left and you live alone in the land" (Is. 4:8; also Micah 2:2). In fact, it is in this effort to grasp and hold tightly that the gift will be lost.

As the dynasty and its attendant theology develop in Israel's experience land arrangements are forgotten. The story of Naboth and Ahab is important because it marks a shift away from the covenant understanding of the land as gift. Israel becomes preoccupied with Jerusalem and the temple to the neglect of the community standards found in the early covenant traditions. The passion for Micah's ministry arises from his observation that Jerusalem is being built on the backs of the poor of the land. (Cf. 2:2ff, 8-9; 3:1-3, 9-12). Rulers, priests, and false prophets have lost their memory. They have forgotten Egypt. They have forgotten their sojourn in the wilderness. They have forgotten that the land is gift and inheritance. The cry of the prophets rings consistently that neither proper worship nor historical links to David are as important as God's standards of justice that arise from their covenant identity (Cf. Micah 6:6-8; Hosea 6:6; Amos 5:21-24).

Yet, despite these calls to remember the land as gift and inheritance, there comes a time in Israel's existence when the only way to find God again is to lose

the land. This is the reality of the ministry of Jeremiah. As Brueggemann states, "Jeremiah's contemporaries are caught in an ideology of continuity and well-being in which human reality is covered over by slogans. The ideology sponsored by the crown and blessed by the temple is powerful, so that it covers all before it."<sup>11</sup> Covered over are memories of Egypt and wilderness. Covered over are memories of the justice central to the land arrangements in the Torah. When slogans replace justice Israel is left vulnerable to every virus, disease, or corruption that might bring separation from Yahweh and the land. It is only through radical surgery that Yahweh can reform his covenant people. It is left again for Yahweh to create a people from nothing as they experience exile. It is in this context that we hear Jeremiah's passionate lament over the land, "O land, land, land, hear the word of the Lord..." (Jeremiah 22:29). Yet, it is only in the loss of the gift that total dependence on God can be reestablished.

The gospel amplifies this message. The way to find life is to lose it. The rhythm of life before God is always seen in courageous grasping and letting go. This message is at the heart of the preaching of Jesus concerning the kingdom (the inheritance we receive from God). Those who are able to receive the ministry of Jesus are those who are poor, hungry, oppressed, and blind. The Lukan beatitudes demonstrate the great reversal of conditions in the kingdom — a reversal longed for by the prophets. Blessed are the poor, the hungry, those who weep, and those who are reviled and insulted. Woe to those who are rich, well fed, those who laugh, and those who find spoken approval from all men" (Luke 6:20-26). It is in this context that we must hear the words of Jesus, "I have come to seek and save

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## Apples and Oranges?

Some might accuse us of comparing apples and oranges at this point. After all, is not the Kingdom of God the reign of God in the hearts of men and women? Is it not a "spiritual" reality? There are no boundary stones to be displaced, after all, or fields to glean in this kingdom.

Certainly the ministry of Jesus transcends the land arrangements of the twelve tribes of Israel. But the reign of God in the lives of men and women is not etherialized by Jesus. His ministry is a pervasive Jubilee (Cf. Luke 4: 18ff.). The kingdom penetrates every aspect of our being. It is open to all who would live daily by the mercies of God. These kingdom people do not gather more than they need, do not store up for themselves treasures on the earth, do not take the seats of honor at banquets. They give alms to the poor and understand that they are forever poor and sinful without God. These people seek the face of Jesus in the faces of the poor, the strangers, and the sojourners in their midst, for such they once were, and to such belong the inheritance of God.<sup>12</sup> These are the people who in the fresh blush of life in the Spirit "held everything in common. Selling their possessions and their goods, they gave to anyone as he had need" (Acts 2:44-45). As William Willimon writes, "Deuteronomy 15:4-5 promised a land free of poverty. That land now takes visible shape within a fellowship that goes beyond the bounds of conventional friendship. In Luke 19:8 a little man is confronted by the gospel and responds by parting with material goods... . Now a whole community does the

same."<sup>13</sup>

This type of community is sustained only with a profound sense of gift. Gift is sustained through the memory of mercy. It is my fear that we have been "landed" so long that we have owned the gift. We have succeeded as a people both institutionally and economically. We have begun to attract a respectable clientele. We have been religious so long that we no longer need mercy. We have built Jerusalem to the point that we have forgotten Egypt in our lives. As a result we are ill-equipped spiritually to practice pure and undefiled religion -- to care for the widow, the sojourner, the poor in our midst. (All of this I say by way of confession.)

It is my hope that the few prophetic voices among us can jog our memories before we need the experience of exile to find God again. I pray that we can be reminded of our covenant relationship with the land. I earnestly hope we will find the spiritual resolve to gather no more than is needed -- to live daily dependent on the mercies of God. I pray we will once again find ourselves in solidarity with those who need mercy in this world -- that we will truly seek and save those who are lost.

There is nothing a-spiritual about the bounty of the earth. Our covenant relationship with God has been bound to the use of the earth's resources from the beginning of time. We are "earthlings." We are called, as Israel was called, to live in covenant with God, the land, and those who occupy it with us.

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*Religion that God our Father  
accepts as pure is this: to look  
after orphans and widows in  
their distress and to keep oneself  
from being polluted by the  
world.*

*James 1:27*

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